

**Critical Thinking Assessment**  
**Communication Studies**  
**May, 2010**

**Critical Thinking:**

The Communication Studies SAC believe that critical thinking is an intricate part of communication. Critical thinking is especially important for students engaging in public discourse. As we teach students to create public presentations, argue ideas, and provide supporting evidence, we expect them to use critical thinking skills. We also expect speakers to present their information in a way that their audience can also think critically. In our Program Review (2008), we stated that

Our courses help students “Identify and investigate problems and to evaluate information and its sources, and use appropriate methods of reasoning to develop creative and practical solutions to personal, professional and community issues.”

Communication Studies courses help students understand the nuances of these processes and give them the skills and confidence to speak out in a variety of contexts. They use their course problem solving activities to present their findings to each other and to those in the community they originally served.

It is time we put our assumptions about what we are doing with critical thinking to a test.

**Assessment Plan:**

The original plan for assessing the effectiveness of critical thinking taught and used in Communication Studies courses was to *conduct four focus groups, one on each campus as well as Southeast Center*. These focus groups would be conducted by inviting current students of SP 111, Public Speaking. The same two people were scheduled to facilitate each of the discussions so the responses could be consistent. The focus groups needed to be held toward the end of the term so that students would have an idea of what they were doing in the course overall.

The actual assessment did not exactly follow this plan. As the term progressed, the facilitators realized they did not have time to conduct four separate focus groups. *We decided to hold one focus group on one campus that all students across the district were invited to attend*. The facilitators put out word to every public speaking instructor throughout the college to gather names of students who were interested in participating in this project. All information was available to the students, including the date, time, location, and that pizza and drinks would be available for the group.

We received names, email addresses, and phone numbers of approximately ten students from Rock Creek campus, Cascade campus, and Sylvania. The facilitators discussed what to do if only one or two students actually attended. It was decided to continue if there were at least three students who confirmed they would attend the meeting. In attempting to contact each student, many decided not to participate, some did not respond, but three were excited about the process. It was decided to proceed.

**The Focus Group**

The focus group was held May 26, 2010 at the Sylvania campus at 3:00-4:30 pm.

Facilitators included the primary facilitator, Chris Edwards (Instructor RC), and recorder, Doris Werkman (Instructor SY). Questions to ask the students were generated by the Communication Studies SAC. While three students had indicated they would be there, only two showed up at the meeting time. The third student arrived the following day in error. Both attending students were taking Public Speaking at Sylvania. Both students perceived their grades as a high “B” or a low “A” for the course (this was asked privately).

Before the meeting began, Edwards gave both students the following definition of “critical thinking” so they would both have the same basic beginning focus: *“Critical thinking is the process of finding, interpreting, integrating and evaluating information.”* Raymond Zeuschner, 2002

Once the students were settled, the meeting began. The questions asked for discussion were:

1. How does critical thinking apply to your student of public speaking?
2. How do you use critical thinking skills to (separate questions):
  - Assess issues and arguments?
  - Evaluate source material?
  - Analyze your audience?
  - Assess the organization of your speech?
  - Assess your credibility
  - Determine appropriate language?
  - Determine appropriate style?
  - Determine appropriate delivery?
  - Assess your peers?
3. How do you help the audience think critically as you present your information?

### **Discussion:**

The students enjoyed discussing what they were learning in their public speaking classes and readily answered questions. Both students tended to focus on certain areas of the speech making process, such as outlining their speeches and evaluating their audiences. They both agreed that organization of their speeches was the backbone of speaking.

While the students touched on ideas of how critical thinking could help them put together their speeches, neither seemed to have a clear view of what is critical thinking. Both described what they considered to be critical thinking, such as how critical thinking can help them pick and choose what references to present. One student said that “outlining was an exercise in critical thinking.” He also believed there was a difference between critical thinking as a speaker than a writer. One student said that he believed that critical thinking was good when preparing for their persuasion speech and that it helps him when thinking on his feet. “It helps to jog my memory,” he said. Each student tended to circle back to the parts of what they considered “critical thinking,” especially when the follow up questions were in areas they did not quite understand the connection with critical thinking.

It was also noted by the facilitators that the students confused audience analysis with “getting to know one another” exercises. While they both understood there was a connection between the audience and the speaker, their idea of how to analyze the audience seemed to be restricted to ice-breaking exercises on the first day of class and an exercise that consisted of emailing their peers to help narrow the focus of their thesis.

Neither student understood how or why they should help their audience think critically. One student did wonder what the audience would take away from their speech. When asked if they thought about how their peers presented information that could be seen as critical thinking, one student said that while he did try to connect their points, that frankly he just didn’t get most of them. This statement led to a discussion between the students about how instructors have to look at the bigger picture, looking more than at content.

Having more students in the discussion could have helped illicit more information from all students. The low number of students involved in the group may have kept the diversity of ideas to a minimum.

### **Conclusions:**

Many of the things we are teaching our students are actually means to thinking critically, even though the student doesn’t recognize it as such. Specifically, we found:

- Students are learning how to evaluate resources (“You have to consider the source, the author, and how credible they are”).
- Students are learning how to organize these sources and information in a manner that makes sense (“Outlining a speech is an exercise in critical thinking.”).
- Students are considering their audience, looking at them critically (“There is a connection between the speaker and the audience”).
- Students are planning their arguments (“There is a fine balance [how to plan persuasion] for each speech”).
- Students are understanding that their audience will not understand the argument if the speech is not well-organized (“The audience can get confused if the organization is wrong”).

We also found that students may be using critical thinking skills but were unaware these were in fact critical thinking skills. For example, as they discussed their classmates’ speeches, they said they were not always clear what they were suppose to take away from the speech and realized this was an important element for the speaker as well as for the listener. They discussed how their delivery tone needed to be appropriate for the subject, but when asked to clarify could not explain the connection to critical thinking.

### **Recommendations:**

Most, if not all, speech communication instructors assume that students come to their classes with some critical thinking skills. In this, we also assume our students can make the connection between our subject, what we are teaching the students to do in preparation and presentation of speeches, and how they are thinking critically.

While our job is not to teach the students how to think critically, many students need more guidance connecting the process of critical thinking as they search for resources, for examining their audience, for how they will organize, prepare, practice, and present their speeches. We believe our job is to help them make these connections. Our job is to support the skills the students have, hone these skills, and help them see how what we want them to do as public speakers. Instructors who are not explicitly linking these concepts for students must stop assuming students know why we want them to analyze their audiences, why we want them to analyze their sources. We must help them make these connections.